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22 March 2010

Mr G Parry
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Dear Mr Parry

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 March 2010 to look at work in mathematics.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how well the curriculum secures progression in mathematical understanding for every student.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of parts of 13 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Students enter the school with standards which are close to average. The proportion who attained GCSE grades A* to C in 2009 was also close to the national average, although it has been higher than this in the past. There has been a significant focus on raising attainment for the current Year 11 cohort. The school's data show that 61% of this group are now working at A* to C grades. This proportion is expected to rise a little more, which would represent good progress for these students.

- Students' progress is satisfactory. Lesson observations showed that the more effective teaching, where objectives and activities and their purpose were clearly explained, secured better progress than when the aims of lessons were less clear. Some students are tenacious and one Key Stage 4 group in particular applied themselves well to a question which was unfamiliar. Others require more support and are less secure in applying knowledge. They prefer, at times, to use rules to reach solutions.
- Students in Key Stages 4 and 5 have positive attitudes towards mathematics and behave well in lessons. In Key Stage 3, some students were less engaged by their lessons. When this was the case, there was a negative impact on learning.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is satisfactory.

- There are significant areas of good and improving teaching in the department. Teachers are subject experts. Relationships between teachers and students are generally positive.
- The strongest teaching is typified by planning which focuses on understanding rather than the completion of tasks. Here, good questioning helps students to demonstrate exactly what they have understood.
- In some lessons, explanations were not clear and examples not used effectively to help students with tasks. These were the lessons where the teachers gave information rather than using questioning to encourage students to think for themselves.
- Consistent use is made of self-assessment by students, who frequently 'traffic light' their understanding at the end of a lesson. There was, however, in the lessons observed, limited use of 'plenary' activities which assessed and consolidated students' understanding.
- Written feedback is variable, both in quality and frequency. The best is very detailed, formative and clearly shows students' current levels or grades in relation to targets. Occasionally, there was little or no marking.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- There is continual review of courses on offer to provide enrichment for the most able students in Key Stage 4. At present, these students study GCSE statistics alongside mathematics and all gained an A* to C grade in 2009.
- There is careful thought and ongoing discussion in preparation for the new mathematics GCSE course to ensure that the specification selected promotes the most positive outcomes for students.
- Schemes of work are good. Those for Years 7 and 8 have been revised to include activities which promote the development of thinking skills.
- There is high take-up of advanced level mathematics courses by sixth-form students who report that they are well served by the curriculum.

Close links with the physics department support understanding in mechanics modules. A particular strength is the further mathematics course which runs even for very small numbers of students.

- There are imaginative activities in collaboration with other subjects, such as art and geography, which promote creativity and enjoyment of the subject.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of mathematics is good.

- Following disappointing GCSE results in 2009, leaders took incisive action to secure better results for the current and subsequent cohorts. Further action was taken following 'mock' examinations. Leaders are motivated to secure further improvements and have set challenging targets.
- Monitoring is rigorous, but at times, issues highlighted are not tackled as quickly as they could be.
- Areas of strength in the department are used to help support improvement but this could be more structured so that all teachers have access to each other's ideas and approaches.

Subject issue: how well the curriculum secures progression in mathematical understanding for every student

- The good curriculum helps to secure mathematical understanding. In Year 7, lessons specifically designed to promote thinking skills and problem-solving are embedded in the curriculum.
- After-school support for older students is greatly appreciated and take-up is high. Students report that their own teacher is always available to help them and they are very appreciative of this.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that the high-quality monitoring that takes place always leads to action which swiftly tackles areas for development
- improving the quality of teaching by:
 - sharing the best practice within the department more effectively
 - ensuring that learning objectives focus on understanding rather than the completion of tasks
 - consistently using effective plenaries to assess and consolidate learning
- accelerating the rates of progress for all students by promoting their skills as independent learners.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop mathematics in the school.

As we explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Helen Pennington
Additional Inspector